TU Professor to Look Into JFK Assassination

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In a roundabout way — a way director Oliver Stone never intended — last year's historical fantasy "JFK" may bring a resolution to the real and imagined mysteries of President John F. Kennedy's assassination.

In doing so, though, a Pandora's box may be opened that is more revealing of the dead president than any heretofore unknown assassins.

That is the opinion of Dr. Kermit Hall, dean of the University of Tulsa's Henry Kendall College of Arts and Sciences. Hall is one of five members of the Kennedy Assassination Review Board, created through legislation originally proposed by U.S. Sen. David Boren, D-Okla.

President Clinton chose Hall for the panel from a list of nominees by the Organization of American Historians. Board members are barred from conflicts of interest — published research on the subject, for instance — and cannot profit from their work once it is completed.

Armed with subpoena powers as well as the authority to grant immunity, the board is charged with identifying all public and private materials pertaining to Kennedy's death. Constrained only by national security considerations, it will then determine which should be made public.

Conspiracy theorists have long clamored for such a disclosure. Their darkest suspicions were fed by the government's reluctance to declassify even routine documents. Ultimately, those suspicions found a voice in Stone's movie about a fearless young president struck down by a conspiracy of greed and political envy.

But however outlandish the movie's premise may have been, it found a large and responsive audience. That, Hall said, roused Congress to action.

"In the absence of an official record, an unofficial record develops," Hall said. "Speculation fills some of the void, and people are left to look at the worst possible explanations. ... The assassination became bigger than the killing itself."

For that reason, he said, the act of mak-

See Professor on News 3

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— Kermit Hall

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Continued from News 1

ing as much information public as possible will probably prove more important than the actual information. Although 80 percent to 85 percent of the government's files on Kennedy's death remain classified, Hall believes it unlikely anything startling about the assassination will be uncovered.

Hall

"We're not likely to find that Lee Harvey Oswald was one of seven gunmen, four of whom were on the grassy knoll," he said. "Under the circumstances, I think it's highly unlikely we'll wind up with somebody besides Lee Harvey Oswald . . . a bungler who got lucky."

Hall said he personally is in general agreement with Gerald Posner, whose recent book, "Case Closed," is "pretty devastating" to conspiracy theories.

"That said, I am going into this with an open mind. If we find a memo that says that J. Edgar Hoover ordered Kennedy killed, we'll put it in there."

Hall hastens to point out that, in any event, his job is "not to solve the Kennedy assassination, but to see all of the information about it gets out."

That promises to be a daunting task, one that could put the Kennedy Assassination Review Board at odds with the Kennedy family itself.

The Kennedys hold a large amount of information on the assassination that has never been made public. Included are the results of the family's own investigation into the murder, as well as private papers. Among the documents are the papers of Robert F. Kennedy, who was attorney general in his brother's administration.

"Is it likely the papers of Bobby Kennedy . . . could be assassination documents? I would think so," Hall said.

But it is not at all clear that the Kennedys are enthusiastic about adding them to the pile Hall and his group will be accumulating. Although Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., voted for the legislation creating the board — with the proviso that autopsy photographs of John Kennedy's body not be made public — Hall said it is his understanding that files pertaining to the family's private investigation have been taken from the Kennedy Library in Boston.

And, of course, there is the obvious fact that the Kennedys have opted to remain largely silent on the subject for three decades.

"It's an exceedingly complex situation," said Hall. "Those papers may have a lot to say about the way the family operates. One of the interesting features of this is that if we move toward full disclosure, it is likely to damage somewhat the reputation of the president."

Hall believes the new information will probably illuminate the assassination itself only peripherally, while possibly bringing to light facts related to Kennedy and his administration.

"It's likely to stir additional questions about Kennedy and his character," said Hall.

But if Hall and his group has its way, the truth — whatever it may be — will out.

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